

Amis family's Spanish idyll ruined by golf development dispute

By Jon Clarke

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For years they have enjoyed the hillside seclusion of Andalucia, benefiting from arguably the best climate in Europe and receiving the occasional visit from their son, Martin Amis.

Now the family of one of Britain's leading contemporary novelists have had their Mediterranean idyll wrecked as they find themselves at the centre of a row over plans for a vast hotel and golf complex. Amis's stepfather, Lord Kilmarnock, who lives in Spain with the author's mother, Hilary Bardwell, is among three Britons being sued for £15m for the alleged tactics they have used to oppose the scheme in Ronda, a pretty hill town worlds away from the concrete sprawl of the Costa del Sol.

The "Los Merinos" scheme is a £100m development of two golf courses, three hotels and 800 homes on the edge of the Sierra de las Nieves national park. But lawyers for the developers, JM Legion Espanola, have claimed that some investors have pulled out because of a campaign stooping to "slander, coercion, intimidation and threats". One lawsuit, claiming that protesters falsified signatures on a petition, has been thrown out of court, resulting in a group of environmental activists planning to counter-sue.

Meanwhile, Lord Kilmarnock and the other two defendants, his fellow Briton David Milnes and a German, Petra Wiegink, have been backed by Spain's Green Party, which this week claimed they had been subject to "Mafia-style harassment that has come out of the alliance between politicians and developers". A friend said: "They are being accused of incredible crimes, which they believe amount to little more than freedom of speech. All they have done is object to a project they believe is bad for the environment."

Lord Kilmarnock has taken the allegations particularly badly, according to the friend. The 80-year-old writer is extremely anxious about the accusation, which is due to have its first hearing in the Ronda courts this month.

The family is concerned about losing its charming smallholding, where they have lived for nearly 20 years, and where Martin Amis has been a visitor. The friend of Lord Kilmarnock, a novelist who was an active member of the House of Lords for more than 20 years, said: "He has been a different person since receiving this writ and I am very worried about him. He is very anxious and concerned about losing his house. If they lose this will completely bankrupt them. It is already costing them a lot of money in legal fees.

"It is particularly scandalous given how much he has done for the area over the past half-century. He is a real friend of Ronda and his books have brought an incalculable number of tourists here as a result. Is this a fair way to treat an old man for giving his point of view?"

Nine individuals have been singled out by the group of companies backing the scheme, which is currently under investigation by the Andalucian Supreme Court. The leaders of local ecologist groups, as well as members of Ronda's Green Police, have also been issued with writs. Many residents have come out to support the nine accused, with more than 400 local professionals, including doctors, journalists and lawyers, taking out an ad in a local paper supporting them.

While the project is legal according to the 1993 Ronda urban plan, which was approved in 1994, the environment department claims there have been various infractions and has ordered work to stop. In particular it cites the fact that the developers only have permission to develop 25 per cent of land, when they are currently altering more than 70 per cent.